

ლევან დვალისვილი

**თბილისური ფოლადი  
და ელიტარაზობი**

ტფილისი გვერდი.

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# **TBILISI'S STEEL AND THE ELIARASHVILI ARMORERS**

Tbilisi  
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**TBILISI'S STEEL AND THE  
ELIARASHVILI ARMORERS  
(Summary)**

i.

Even in this day and age, the aesthetic appearance and physical qualities of ancient sword blades made of so-called 'watered steel' still fascinate an observer and draw the attention of specialists and enthusiasts of historic weapons alike. Yet, despite the long-established interest in the subject, the history of 'wootz' and damascene steel technologies is full of blank pages. There are still a few unanswered questions fueling discussions in academic circles, such as the time and place of invention, routes, and dynamics of geographic proliferation, the terminological etymology, and technological aspects among others. In Georgian academia, scholars occasionally entertained questions related to the historical existence of wootz and damascene steel production in Tbilisi even before historical weapon studies started to emerge as a specific branch of ethnography. However, due to the intermittent nature of such interest, as well as other factors, not a single comprehensive study of the subject has been produced so far.

One of the main challenges complicating any professional inquiry into the history of wootz and damascene steel manufacturing in Georgia is the lack of easily available historical data. Unfortunately, many administrative records from the time of the Georgian kingdom, as well as the archival documents from the period of the Russian Imperial administration of Georgia had not survived to the

present day. Moreover, during the long period of the Soviet regime in Georgia, the studies of traditional steel manufacturing, historical arms, and related crafts were neither popular nor encouraged. The entirety of available works, explicitly or indirectly related to the studies of traditional arms and the history of their production, remain scattered throughout academic literature, such as archeological reviews, historical essays, and various branches of anthropology. This book is a result of cross-disciplinary research originally designed to compile topic-related historical, archeological, and ethnographic data for the purpose of comprehensive analysis. The present work aspires to introduce the summary of its findings for the benefit of professional researchers, museum curators, and connoisseurs of historical arms and armor.

ii.

The question of the existence of wootz and damascene technologies in the Georgian past arises, to begin with, from the existence of substantial archeological evidence. A variety of Damascene steel artifacts had been discovered in archeological sites throughout Georgia. The beginning of the Iron Age is the earliest date established by methods of attribution. For instance, the knife and the axe from the ancient burial ground of Tli are dated to the period between the 10<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Speaking of more numerous artifacts attributed to the period of the Middle Ages, it is noteworthy that besides weaponry, another group of Damascene steel objects consists of various tools or household items. Regarding 'wootz' artifacts found in Georgia, presently the oldest one is the unique sword approximately dated to 1000 AD. The sword was discovered by the Georgian-British archaeological team during the period of 2013-2016 excavations in Darial gorge located in Kazbek

municipality.

Other important sources of supportive data are medieval literature and contemporary ethnographic studies of oral tradition and folklore. The in-depth examination of the Georgian medieval texts ranging from epic poems, courtly and chivalric poetry, and hagiographic works among other forms of ecclesiastic medieval literature revealed four distinct terms used to designate wootz steel throughout centuries, namely – **basri**, **poladi**, **javardeni**, and **almasi**. Out of these four terms, **basri**, appears to be the oldest and the most common term. The term **poladi** emerges around the XII century, while **javardeni**, apparently used intermittently and yet simultaneously with the first term, gradually underwent a semantic shift and became more common in the texts of the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The last term **almasi** in certain instances, depending on the context, appears to be used as an epithet semantically equivalent to wootz. Furthermore, the ethnographic research in different Georgian subcultural locales yielded an array of folk terms denoting various steel types related to wootz and damascene steel.

The etymological analysis of the traditional Georgian terminology of steel alloys used in the manufacture of arms revealed, among other discoveries, a strong possibility of a relevant cross-cultural material and linguistic exchange in the past. The evidence of Georgian linguistic borrowings directly coincides with the reasonable presumption that the geographical location of Georgia at the junction of massive regional cultures and civilizations had inevitably made it a beneficiary, conductor, and carrier of emerging metallurgical technologies. The strongest evidence in regard to this theory arguably must originate within the period of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century that witnessed an increasingly massive participation of Georgian mercenary forces in the armies of two rival states, Safavid Iran and



Ottoman Porta. In search of relevant circumstantial evidence to the scale and significance of regional connections, we investigated foreign sources, namely period-related travelogues, memoirs, and chronicles. The relevance of the chosen time period and the importance of the scale of Georgian military involvement could be derived from the fact that during the “golden era” of wootz production in Persia (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) elite Georgian regiments formed a significant part of the Persian military. The particular encounter described by the 18th-century German traveler Karsten Niebuhr precisely demonstrates the point. According to Niebuhr, the entire detachment of the Persian army he met in 1765 consisted of Christian Georgians, all being armed with “the best quality guns, pistols, and sabers made of Damascene steel.” This historical note, among others, is indicative of a probability that Georgians of this period were at least aware if not familiar with Persian wootz and damascene steel manufacturing technologies.

iii.

The Georgian wootz and damascene steels, particularly those produced in Tbilisi, emerged from the shadows of history to the attention of European scholars during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Georgian material culture and particularly military heritage came under the scrutiny of the newly established Russian Imperial authorities in the Caucasus. Since the Russian inquiries into Georgian technologies occurred at the same time when Europe experienced a sudden flare-up of interest toward the steel technologies of the East, consequently Tbilisi’s wootz and damascene steel weaponry gained recognition by Western researchers and became the subject of their curiosity and study.

In 1821, Italian scientist, physicist, and engineer Antonio Crivelli

published in Milan his study of Damascene steel. His work turned out to be influential in motivating further studies of the subject. Noteworthy, Crivelli's assessment placed contemporary products of Tiflis (Tbilisi) alongside Egyptian, Persian, and old Damascus blades, and designated Georgian weaponry as highly acclaimed and the most expensive in Europe. In the wake of Crivelli's work, many other European authors made sure to write about or mention the wootz of Tiflis. Among those writers, for instance, are the following: the English artist, diplomat, and traveler Sir Robert Ker-Porter; Prominent military figures such as Van don Jean Halen, and L. von Falkenstein; the renowned British weaponsmith Henry Wilkinson; Professor Lielegi, and others.

A substantial number of reference entries and comments on the wootz of Tiflis (Tbilisi) is found also in Russian official journals published during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in French and German trade digests and encyclopedic dictionaries. Among Russian scientific publications of the time, one stands out as explicitly dedicated to the history and technology of wootz production. It is the work of the scientist, metallurgist, and mining engineer Pavel Anosov, acknowledged as the first Russian scientist to solve the secrets and challenges of wootz production. His comprehensive study was published in 1841, in the specialized "Mining Journal". Evidently, Anosov collected enough evidence about the existence of wootz and Damascene steel production in Tbilisi as to consider Georgia alongside such historical centers of production as Japan, China, India, Persia, Bukhara, and Turkey.

#### iv.

The review of the historical production of 'wootz' and damascene weaponry in Tbilisi begins with an inquiry into the tradition-

al organization of labor and the location of production facilities within the city. The traditional organization and labor practices of armorers were not much different from other urban guilds. Though historically some of the weaponsmiths worked in different parts of the city, including its outskirts, the majority of masters had their workshops in a particular city quarter. The collection of tightly adjacent workshop buildings known as armorer's row was lined up alongside the west side of the Royal Square. The architectural layout and external appearance of the Tbilisi's Armorer's row as it existed until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, likely emerged in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of king Rostom, one of those few Georgian kings who were converted from Christianity to Islam. Before his ascension to the Georgian throne, Rostom spent most of his life in Persia thus growing fond of Persian culture and the Persian way of administration. Starting with his reign, Georgian foreign relations significantly improved. Previously frequent and destructive Persian incursions into Georgia stopped, and the kingdom gradually entered a period of stability and peaceful development. Seizing the opportunity to concentrate on internal affairs, King Rostom aimed most of his efforts at the improvement of trade and crafts in Georgia. During his reign, many reforms were introduced and successfully carried out. As a result, the capital of his kingdom, Tbilisi experienced economic development and turned into a vibrant, flourishing city.

King Rostom moved the royal palace from the Narikala fortress to the territory located between the Sioni Church and the An-chiskhati Basilica. The reconstruction of the city quarter in the immediate proximity of the Royal palace was planned out in Persian style. In accordance with the plan, the newly constructed workshops were erected west of the Royal Square in the closest proxim-

ity to the palace. However, it should be noted that archaeological research indicates the existence of workshops in this area long before the reign of Rostom. Essentially, reconstruction undertaken by the king only rearranged the layout and altered the outer appearance of the previously existing sector of the city. The new plan testified to the Royal prioritization of weapon manufacturing before other crafts because armorers occupied the most prestigious row of buildings facing the square and the closest to the royal palace.

The weaponsmith district near the Royal palace lasted without many changes from the reign of king Rostom until the year 1795 when Tbilisi fell to the invading Persian army of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar. Enraged by Georgian defiance and losses inflicted by the defenders of Tbilisi the Persian Shah ordered the complete destruction of the city. Persian troops were given permission to pillage and burn. As a result, many famous landmarks of the Georgian capital including royal palaces, markets, workshops, and royal arsenals were demolished. Tbilisi's population suffered as well. Perhaps most of the fit-to-combat weaponsmiths had perished in the defense of the city alongside royal troops and peoples' militias. Their families most likely shared the fate of the non-combatant population either murdered or taken into captivity in the aftermath of the battle.

The new stage in the restoration and development of Tbilisi began in 1801, after the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti with its capital Tbilisi by the Russian Empire. Imperial authorities decided to build administrative buildings around the former royal square, and consequently, the Armorers' row was moved several hundred meters away from it and found a new home next to the Sioni Church. In that new location, workshops existed undisturbed until the 1920s.

v.

A significant part of arms produced in Tbilisi was traditionally exported to markets of Persia, Syria, and the Northern Caucasus thus creating a tradition that persisted well into the 19th century. For instance, the reliance of Georgian craftsmen for their livelihood on export is evident from the Russian Imperial decree issued in 1831. In the year following the assassination of Russian envoy A.S. Griboedov in Tehran, Russian government alarmed by the unrest in the Persian provinces of Yazd and Kerman decided to enforce restrictions on the export of edged weaponry and other arms to Persia. However, the Russian authorities in Tbilisi must have conveyed the displeasure of Georgian weaponsmiths to Saint Petersburg because a specially issued Imperial decree made an exception for the export of daggers.

Information about the Tbilisi weaponsmiths of the medieval period is very scarce even though names of various masters, makers of sabers, daggers, and other arms surface from time to time in historical documents. Perhaps, the most interesting fact in the history of arms and armor craftsmanship in Georgia is the existence of masters who held the titles of nobility. According to the sources, this privileged group of craftsmen-noblemen enjoyed certain social immunities and were answerable only to their king. Some of the famous weaponsmiths of Tbilisi belonged to that unusual social sub-class of working nobility.

Troughout the centuries Tbilisi's weaponsmiths kept developing their own distinctive decorative style, reflecting both local traditions and occasional foreign influences. The complexity of this particular aspect of Georgian craftsmanship is a matter of future research. It suffices to say that history of the emergence of Tbilisi decorative tradition in arms-making could be untangled within a

historical context. Historically, each noticeable shift in the style of arms could be correlated to certain influential events taking place within each respective period, for instance, the capture of Tbilisi by the Turks; the politically motivated prohibition of access to the Persian market, cultural exchange via participation of Georgian mercenary forces in foreign campaigns throughout the Middle East, the annexation of the Kartli-Kakheti kingdom by Russian Empire and deployment of Russian troops in Tbilisi; the strike of Tbilisi craftsmen in the year 1865; the limitation of the number of professional guilds or associations of Tbilisi craftsmen and the consequent influx of weaponsmiths from regions of Dagestan, etcetera.

vi.

The legendary skills of the renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century Eliarashvili clan of metalsmiths and weapon-makers inspired admiration far beyond the borders of the former Georgian kingdom. The names of Geurk Eliarashvili and his son Karaman were spoken around the world, from Tbilisi markets to the aristocratic saloons of Russia. Until recently the history of the famous Eliarashvili (Eliarov) masters was clouded in controversies and dominated by erroneous narratives inherited from works of Soviet academia that indicated a clear ***mala fide*** or deceptive intention on the part of its authors who instead of research spent efforts to deconstruct the historical reality about a distinctive and long-established, centuries-old aesthetically Georgian style and quality of arms, endemic to Tbilisi and maintained by armorers of Tbilisi, regardless of their ethnicity and place of origin.

Considering the traditionally multi-confessional and multinational make of the Tbilisi population the question of the ethnicity of a particular craftsman should be legitimate, but one of many



ordinary points of research. Unfortunately, the deliberate politicization and manipulation of facts about the ethnicity of the Eliarashvili clan became an emblematic and popular stress line in Russian and Armenian scientific circles. The misdirected desire to claim some kind of ethnic ownership of Eliarashvili heritage took precedence over studying the actual aspects of the clan's history. For instance, the lack of knowledge about the dates of birth and death of each master resulted in erroneous attribution of most works preserved in museums' collections. Fortunately, the current in-depth investigation resulted in the establishment of many formerly unknown facts about the Eliarashvili weaponsmith dynasty. Among other achievements, the research brought final and irrefutable clarity to the question of the Eliarashvili origin, hopefully closing this chapter once and for all.

It must be noted that establishing an ethnic origin of a craftsman working in any of the famous production centers of the Caucasus or the Middle East is often not an easy task and remains problematic for several reasons. For instance, many craftsmen with traditional Islamic names, were, in fact, representatives of predominantly Christian nations of the East – Greeks, Georgians, and Armenians, among others. Generally, the Islamization of names among members of formerly Christian communities was induced by the official treatment of Christians under Islamic law that imposed on Christians taxes and discriminatory restrictions. However, some Churches achieved more favorable arrangements, as in the case of the Armenian Monophysites who enjoyed a variety of privileges throughout Islamic states in the Middle East. Therefore, another available option for Georgian craftsmen, besides converting to Islam, to evade tax penalties and restrictions was a transfer of their religious affiliation from the persecuted Georgian Or-

thodox Church to the Monophysite Armenian Church. As a result, many Georgians living and working under Islamic authorities in diasporas or occupied territories and wishing to remain within tenets of the Christian faith rather than convert to Islam would often enter Armenian communities and consequently receive Armenian names upon baptism. Thus, the craftsman's ethnic origin cannot be derived from the immediate onomastic assessment of names or surnames, without investigating religious affiliation, and the family's background.

The original confusion about master Geurk began with his given name which appeared in different sources in its various forms as follows: Geurk, Egor, George. The variations of the spelling of the master's patronymic or surname appear even more diverse: Elizarashvili, Eliazarishvili, Eliazarov, Egiazarov, Elizarov, Eliazaroshvili, etc. Such variety is a result of the colonial administration, namely misspellings by the Russian clerks, as well as the administration's tendency to Russianize native Georgian names. Newly discovered archival documents helped to establish that the correct form of the given name and surname of the master is Geurk Eliarashvili. His family belonged to the Queen's noblemen of Kartli, one of the sub-regions of Georgia. Two other Georgian forms of the surname are misspellings, whereas Eliarov and Eliazarov are late Russianized forms.

According to historical documents, representatives of the Eliarashvili clan emerge quite active since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their name appears for the first time in the Charter, dated 1653, declaring the land grant issued to the ancestors of Geurk by the Georgian queen, the wife of king Rostom. Interestingly, the area of Eliarshvilis' residence is located in the Poladauri gorge of the Bolnisi, a region not only rich in iron deposits but long established as

a place of ore mining and metallurgic activity since ancient times. Even more interesting is that the local toponymy evokes vocabulary associated with metalsmithing.

The established date of Geurk's birth is 1769, and the approximate date of his death is between 1822 and 1824. The date of death of his son Karaman Eliarashvili (Eliarov) – September 28, 1864. This important discovery automatically discredits many existing attributions of edged weaponry as works of Geurk Eliarashvili. Such attributions were previously based on several Russian sources in which a certain "Geurk" is mentioned after the year 1824. For instance, in literary drafts of the famous Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov written between the year 1837 and 1838, the name of Geurk is found a few times, twice regarding the daggers made by Geurk, and once alleging the poet's encounter with the master himself. According to our analysis of previously known and newly discovered documents, we arrived at the conclusion the Geurk mentioned after 1824 is none other than his son Karaman Eliarashvili, who used his father's name as a brand name for weaponry produced in the family's workshop.

In conclusion, throughout the ages, Tbilisi, metaphorically speaking functioned as the multifaceted cultural core of the Caucasian Oikumene. For centuries it was known as and served as an international trade hub and well-known center of arms production. One monograph cannot possibly encompass all the aspects of its rich cultural heritage or exhaust all available sources. The author continues his research and hopes that his current work will inspire his colleagues and foreign scholars to do relevant studies in their respective fields of science.